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Town halts its pumping of water into ditch

By Jim Procter

Staff writer

GRIFFITH — Griffith has stopped pumping water from its landfill into a drainage ditch that is believed to empty into Turkey Creek amid concerns the water may be contaminated by an adjacent toxic waste dump.

Robert Swale of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said Griffith officials told him Wednesday the pumping from a clay pit at the landfill would stop until EPA technicians can inspect the site this morning.

"We intend to take water and soil samples," Swale said. "The flow of ground water concerns us along with their digging down into the clay."

Swale said Griffith officials have also promised to stop removing sand in the pit area that also may be contaminated. The landfill will be allowed to continue pumping leachate — water that drains from garbage and debris — to the Hammond Sanitary District, Swale said. He added, however, that federal regulators want to determine the level, if any, of pre-treatment of the leachate.

Swale is project manager for the American Chemical Services Inc., Superfund site at 420 S. Colfax St. The site includes an inactive portion of the Griffith landfill on which wastes from the chemical dump were disposed. As many as 30,000 drums of chemical waste are believed buried on the site, authorities have said.

At a meeting in Griffith last week, EPA and Indiana Department of Environmental Management officials told residents preliminary tests show contamination of the Calumet aquifer beneath the Superfund site. The deeper Valparaiso aquifer is not believed to be contaminated.

Water flows from the Calumet aquifer in a northwesterly direction, or toward the active portion of the landfill, EPA tests show. Thus, the EPA wants to determine if polluted water is contaminating the water being pumped into the drainage ditch as well as the clay and sand.

Another EPA concern is that digging of the clay pit "could put the Valparaiso aquifer in danger," Swale said.

The clay is used as cover for the landfill, said John Bach, Griffith's public works director. He said water is pumped on an "as needed" basis from the pit. Bach disputed charges from neighbors and environmentalists that the clay pit has been dug in the last few days. He also questioned whether the drainage ditch actually empties into Turkey Creek.

"My understanding is it has been blocked for years and drains into a swamp," said Bach. The ditch flows in a southerly direction on the west side of the landfill.

Terry McCloskey, president of the Indiana division of the Izaak Walton League, said the ditch does flow into Turkey Creek, which in turn empties into Lake George in Hobart.

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"The town of Griffith has contaminated Turkey Creek and Lake George," McCloskey charged. "This is one of the most flagrant violations I've seen."

Bach said the leachate from the landfill is not treated before being received by the Hammond Sanitary District. He said Hammond officials visited the landfill Wednesday to take samples.